

OPINION

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FARMERS' MOVEMENT

(A Need to Rethink Agricultural Policies)

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THE Maharashtra farmers' movement has recently been given a lot of coverage in the press, some of it fairly neutral reporting, much of it justifiable criticism against the violence and sabotage to which some members of the demonstrating groups have resorted, and also against the closing of highways and railway routes which put a lot of 'innocent' people to inconvenience. One wonders why, when every other organized group uses this kind of blackmail to get what it wants, only farmers are expected to be rational and patient and non-violent. Generally, citizens have to resort to pressure tactics only when a normal dialogue with the authorities is not possible. Those who deplore the farmer's violence, therefore, should first condemn a government which is not willing to give an ear to the farmers' just demands. Here I do not mean only the present government but every government which has been in power since independence. That an ordinary dialogue was never possible between the government and the farmer has been made clear by the stated policy of the government not to give the farmer a remunerative price for his produce, which means a price which takes into account his production costs and leaves him a reasonable margin of profit.

In this connection, the declaration of minimum prices for grain is a farce. Generally these prices are far lower than the prevailing market prices and farmers have to be forced to sell a certain proportion of their production as levy to the government. Then when the market prices do fall below the guaranteed prices, the government stops buying or offers to buy at the market prices. There is thus no such thing as a support price.

Because a vast number of farmers in this country consider farming a way of life and have gone on farming whether it pays or not, nobody has felt it necessary to see to it that farming offers them a reasonable livelihood. Our policy-makers have made it clear that industry has priority over agriculture and agriculture is expected to provide cheap raw materials to industry; and that urban dwellers have priority over rural citizens. Prices of agricultural produce have not kept pace with the prices of other commodities, thus continuously decreasing the flow

of money into rural areas while increasing it into urban areas, thus increasing rural poverty.

This whole structure is by now so deeply entrenched that increasing the prices of agricultural produce will lead to an overhaul of the whole economic life of the country. So far farmers have been the most unenlightened and unorganized group and as such very vulnerable to exploitation. The only way in which it can be reversed is by farmers getting organized, and the farmers' movement must be welcomed as a step in that direction. It is immaterial that just now only the sugarcane, cotton and onion farmers are the only ones demanding higher prices. One cannot, for this reason, dismiss it as a rich farmers' movement. First of all, all the farmers who grow these crops are not necessarily big or wealthy landowners. And second, the leaders of the movement intend it to filter down to the level of the smallest and poorest farmers.

Every government touts its own generosity by pointing out the subsidies given to farmers or the loans written off. Now the farmer is at last getting organized and will be in a position to say that he does not need charity. He wants a fair price for his produce which will enable him to do without charity.

There is an anomalous situation in this country where farm produce prices are concerned. If prices go up, production increases. As soon as production increases, prices crash. Actually, this is a normal cycle and, if allowed to operate at its own momentum, might give an overall fair price to the grower. However, the government keeps its hands off when there is overproduction and the farmer has to sell his produce at throwaway prices, and steps in to control prices the moment they begin to rise sufficiently to make the urban consumer scream. What keeps happening with regard to onions is a case in point.

Even in the case of items which are not considered necessities of life and therefore left alone, farmers rarely get the major share of the benefit of high prices. There are so many stages through which an item reaches the city consumer, and so much margin of profit added at each stage, that when the consumer is paying, say, three rupees a kilo for something, the chances are that the farmer is getting only about a rupee or less. In the case of non-perishable items like grain, the farmer who has neither the financial capacity to wait for money nor the space to store the produce, is forced to sell as soon as the crop is harvested—and often while it is still in the field—and fares ever worse.

Until now all facts may have been known but have been conveniently ignored. One hopes that the farmers' movement will serve to bring about some rethinking not just of the price structure of agricultural commodities but of the wider problems of agriculture, because lack of remunerative prices is by no means the only thing that ails agriculture.

One important factor which keeps the farmer poor is the size of the average land holding. It is much too small to be economically viable. Half an acre or less of dry land, even in the assured rainfall tracts, can yield only a couple of bags of grain which, no matter how

much you paid for them, will not sustain a family for a year. Most holdings have become so small through division and subdivision in each generation. Whether primogeniture is fair or not is a separate problem, but it at least keeps land holdings intact through generations. We have a **tukdebandi** law which is supposed to prevent the division of a piece of land below a certain minimum size. In effect, however, land continues being divided into ridiculously small parcels as brothers fight and refuse to farm together and demand their own share. (One thinks of the great fuss made over all the family feeling Indian families are supposed to have.) I have seen, in the Koyna valley, for instance, strips fifteen feet wide and perhaps a hundred feet long belonging to one farmer. When asked how they can manage to hold such a small piece of land they answer that on paper the size of the holding is the minimum allowed by the law. In practice they mark the separate strips off by small bunds, wasting more of their meagre holdings under the bunds.

Another thing that has contributed to the growth of small uneconomical holdings and lowered land productivity is the ceiling on agricultural lands in Maharashtra. Nobody will question the justice of taking land away from those who have vast holdings running into thousands of acres which they cannot and do not even want to supervise. They are only interested in bleeding the lands, and give them out to share-croppers, not caring what yields are obtained because no matter how small a quantity they get from each acre, their overall earnings can be quite high. Moreover, they get all this without spending a paise on improving the land.

The law measures by the same stick these landowners and the cultivators who may have fifty or a hundred acres of land, are good farmers who give personal supervision to the cultivation of their lands, and who, by making the lands more and more productive, create employment for a large number of labourers. Even if one were to agree that social justice demands that such cultivators too should lose the land which they hold in excess of the maximum allowed by the law, parcelling out this excess land to the landless in one or two-acre pieces without considering what is going to happen to that land cannot form part of social justice. If you can distribute the land in this manner and ensure that it remains as productive as it was, then nothing will be lost. But nobody can ensure this.

Theoretically, the nationalised banks are supposed to provide finance to the small landowners. In practice, they rarely provide the full finance that growing a crop requires. They work on the theory that everyone asks for a much bigger loan than he needs, so they feel justified in paring something off the amount applied for. This immediately reduces the possibility of the crop being given the optimum inputs and diminishes its yield potential. This is if a farmer approaches a bank for a loan at all. Most small landowners, including the landless who have been newly given land do not. They are too poor and scared to

take the risk of the crop failing and their ending up with a debt which they have no money to repay. Many of the landless who have got land under the ceiling act let it lie fallow for a number of years. If they cultivate it at all, they may sow a grain crop and get a couple of quintals a year from the land. This land is thus allowed to become less productive or unproductive. Giving land to the landless is going to work only if enough land is given and, in areas of low rainfall, at least a small portion of it is irrigated. Otherwise it cannot become an economically viable unit.

A majority of farmers in this state thus own too little land to give them a living. The major part of their livelihood has to come from other work. Most of them work on other farms. In irrigated areas work is available for much of the year. In dry areas where only one crop is grown during the year, agricultural labour can be used for only a few months. Whenever and wherever the availability of labour is higher than the demand, the wages paid to labourers plummet. The minimum wage act is difficult to implement, and is generally used by labour officers only to harass certain farmers. In this connection, a very effective check on the exploitation of labour is the employment guarantee scheme in this state. Even with all its shortcomings and the complaints of corruption, the alternative employment it offers can eventually force employers of agricultural labour to pay the legal minimum wage.

This still leaves a not inconsiderable section of the rural population which cannot be absorbed into the agricultural labour force. They find work in the cities. Although this helps by adding to the income of their families, it does not take the pressure off agricultural lands. The persons who work in the city do not give up their title to their land. A brother or a cousin cultivates their share. The owner sends him money for expenses and may or may not claim a share in the produce but will never give up his right to the land. He may live and work in the city for forty years without relinquishing his title to the land because the ownership of land gives him a sense of security, a sense of something to fall back on. He may retire to the village or he may not. In any case his sons, who also are probably never going to go back to the village, divide up the land among themselves after the father is dead.

(To be continued)

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